

# The Gozo *Vitello d'Oro* Treasure of 1729

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**Abstract:** The study sheds new light upon what is perhaps the best-known story of a treasure trove discovered in Gozo, consisting of an idol in the form of a golden calf that was reputedly unearthed by Antonio Pace in 1729. The episode resulted in the arrest, torture and death of Giuseppe Cassar, accused of having acquired the treasure and refusing to hand it over to Grand Master Vilhena. Cassar's substantial property was also confiscated and subsequently passed over by the grand master to the hospital of St John in Gozo. The story of the discovery was doubted even by some contemporaries, while others such as the Hospitaller Baron de Stadl and the historians Agius de Soldanis and Giovanni Antonio Ciantar accepted it. Newly-discovered documentation confirms the unreliable character of Pace and the activity of Cassar as a money-lender which may have contributed to his fall. Grand Master Vilhena himself was not averse to interfering directly in the course of justice to suit his own ends. All this makes it most likely that the discovery was a figment of Pace's imagination and which resulted in the brutal death of Cassar and the taking over of his wealth.

**Keywords:** golden calf, treasure, Gozo, Hospital of St John, Antonio Pace, Giuseppe Cassar, Grand Master Vilhena.

The more or less constant occupation of the Maltese islands for millennia and the struggles over their conquest by various Mediterranean powers especially prior to 1530 has always made the discovery of treasure in the form of hidden coins or precious artefacts a real possibility. The constant risk of incursions by sea, coupled with the very real fear of one's wealth being taken away by robbers, continued to induce the more prosperous inhabitants of both islands to resort to hiding their wealth through the use of various stratagems. It was only with the spread of banking facilities and the building of a gradual trust in them that hiding one's moveable riches started to give way to having them entrusted to financial institutions.

Recorded instances of the discovery of treasure in different areas of the islands are quite frequent. Naturally, discoveries which were never reported must have occurred at least as often and very likely even more. Discovered treasure – even prior to 1530 – was claimed by the islands' sovereign, irrespective of whether it was discovered on public or private land or within the precincts of immoveable property.<sup>1</sup> During the first decades following the arrival of the Order a number of private individuals asked for and were granted licences to seek hidden treasure. Such licences were granted with the understanding that the government would obtain a percentage – often specified as one-third – of any treasure discovered. In the case of accidental or unlicensed discovery the Order claimed the entire find.<sup>2</sup>

The most substantial reported discovery of gold was that which took place on the evening of 12 April 1698 when a boy, playing in the construction site of the new cathedral at Mdina, discovered what turned out to be a hoard worth some 9,000 *scudi* in Arab and Byzantine gold coins. Notwithstanding that the cache had been discovered on property which had been purchased by the Church, the bishop of Malta immediately acknowledged that part of the treasure was due to the grand master as sovereign lord of Malta. Almost inevitably a dispute arose as to how the hoard was to be shared between the ecclesiastical and the secular authorities.<sup>3</sup> The discovery of artefacts not made of precious metals were often considered of little importance and these generally ended being destroyed, either due to their pagan connotations or simply for them to be utilized for more practical needs, such as when earthenware artefacts were crushed and turned into *deffun* used for the sealing of roofs. It was only through the efforts of a handful of Maltese antiquarians, the most notable of whom were Giovanni Francesco Abela (1582–1655) and Giovanni Pietro Francesco Agius de Soldanis (1712–70), that such artefacts were saved and some of them today feature among the most important exhibits in Maltese national museums.

One of the most intriguing discoveries is said to have taken place in Gozo in 1729. The standard eighteenth-century version of the episode

1 G. Wettinger, 'The Gold Hoard of 1525', *Melita Historica*, 7 (1976), 25–33.

2 *Ibid.*, 32–3.

3 For a contemporary description of this discovery and the dispute following it, A[rchivio] S[egreto] V[aticano] S[egreteria] di S[tato], Malta 49, ff. 83–4 and 201–2, Pro-Inquisitor Famucelli and Inquisitor Messerano–SS, dated 17.4.1698 and 2.8.1698 respectively.

recounted how a dream led Antonio Pace, a simple rustic, to discover a hidden treasure in a recess near the old and deconsecrated church of St Nicholas in the area of Dwejra in Gozo. The valuable find allegedly consisted of a golden idol in the form of a calf and its dimensions as described varied from between one to one-and-two-thirds to two Maltese *palmi*, equivalent to between 44 and 54 centimetres.<sup>4</sup> The statue was never actually seen by anyone and its description was provided only by Pace, who claimed to have unearthed it. The calf was said to have stood on a plinth, similarly made of gold, and it had a gem stuck to its forehead with two other gems set as its eyes.<sup>5</sup> Initially it was also rumoured that, together with the golden idol, 60,000 *scudi* worth of gold coins had also been discovered.<sup>6</sup> The lucky peasant was, however, duped into passing his precious discovery over to Giuseppe Cassar, a prosperous Gozitan member of the *Universitas* of Gozo and a friend of Grand Master Antonio Manoel de Vilhena.

News about the discovery soon reached the ears of the grand master who summoned Cassar and requested him to give up the treasure since it belonged to the sovereign. When Cassar kept denying that he was in possession of any such treasure the grand master ordered him to be put on trial and tortured to reveal the location of the valuable discovery. Cassar continued to deny everything and, being of an advanced age, ended up seriously injured by the tortures inflicted and had to be taken to the hospital. He died there some days later in chains and without ever revealing what he had done with the treasure. The court meanwhile had ordered that since the treasure could not be traced, all Cassar's property was to be confiscated and handed over to the grand master, while Cassar

- 4 ASV SS, Malta 72, ff. 280–1, Inquisitor Serbelloni–SS, dated 6.8.1729 gave the dimensions as two *palmi*. Agius de Soldanis, in his MS 'Il Gozo antico–moderno', completed in 1746, stated that the idol measured about one and two-thirds of a Maltese *palma*. See N[ational] L[ibrary] of M[alta], Libr. MS 145, 58. An earlier draft of de Soldanis' history of Gozo has survived as NLM Libr. MS 145A, but the account of the golden calf is identical in both. The Maltese *palma* measured 0.2619 metres and hence, according these early descriptions, the statue measured between 43.65 and 53.8 cm. In his *Della Lingua Punica ...* (Rome, 1750), 26, de Soldanis reduces the size of the idol to one Maltese *palma*.
- 5 Id., 'Il Gozo antico-moderno', 58. G.A. Ciantar, *Malta Illustrata*, I (Malta, 1772), 365. On the same page Ciantar also reports the discovery of modest amounts of gold and silver ore in Gozo.
- 6 ASV SS, Malta 72, ff. 280–1. Serbelloni's report is the only known source referring to the rumour about the discovery of coins as well as the idol. Serbelloni's brief account is the earliest describing the discovery and subsequent developments.

was to be sent to the galleys. De Vilhena then proceeded to generously grant all the confiscated property to the hospital of St John in Gozo by means of a formal contract. The story, with the inevitable variations and additions accumulated over time, became pretty much part of Maltese lore and was never dismissed to the realm of historical fancy. In the mid-nineteenth century it was still being written about in the local papers, while in 1968 it even inspired the plot of a movie.<sup>7</sup>

The veracity of the account of the alleged discovery was doubted even by a number of contemporaries who described the whole affair as a tale.<sup>8</sup> According to the earliest description of the episode, everyone was sceptical about the find and it was only when Giuseppe Cassar was accused of retaining the treasure and consequently arrested that the story started to earn some credibility.<sup>9</sup> Doubts, however, persisted. Pace's claim of being told the location of the treasure in a dream was seen as far-fetched as was the existence of such a valuable object on an island that was always considered secondary to Malta and in any case was perennially poor. The ease with which the finder handed over the treasure to another with hardly any recompense was another salient point in the story that hardly proved credible. On a different level it was argued that had such a valuable object really been found, the grand master had no right to it since the laws of the land specified that treasure which fell under the sovereign's ownership had to consist of minted coins and not artefacts, irrespective of the latter's value.

The most detailed known discussion of the discovery was that by Balí Ferdinand Ernst, Baron Stadl (1685–1743). Stadl, a cultured member of the Order with an interest in antiquities, authored a number of manuscript treatises on Maltese archaeological remains discovered during his lifetime.<sup>10</sup> His description of the golden calf episode is dated 1731, just two years following its reported discovery and at the time of writing Stadl was serving in the trusted position of seneschal to

7 A version of the story appeared in the *Malta Times* of 5.6.1840. *Treasure in Malta* was an adventure movie filmed in Malta and Gozo in 1962–63.

8 NLM, Libr. MS 170, 226. In Stadl's words (see below), 'che in tutto era una favola'.

9 ASV SS, Malta 72, f. 280.

10 Stadl's writings are to be found in NLM, Libr. MSS 140, 145, and 170. On Stadl, M. Galea, 'Ferdinand Ernst Stadl (1684–1743): Knight and Scholar', *Sacra Militia*, 4 (2005), 29–36.

Vilhena.<sup>11</sup> Significantly, rather than discussing the discovery in its own right, Stadl's account was specifically intended to rebut the arguments which were being made by what he described as newsmongers or *novellisti* who affirmed that the discovery was nothing more than a hoax. Stadl's account was aimed for circulation among the local educated elite. The rather long-winded arguments brought forward by Stadl are mostly drawn from theological precedents, such as the Pharaoh's dream explained by Joseph, or from the classical and mythological texts and no sound first-hand evidence proving the discovery is ever provided. By far the bulk of the account discusses the islands' history, generally based on the writings of classical authors, with the aim to prove the plausibility of such a treasure existing in Gozo.<sup>12</sup>

Of the other contemporary writers known to have discussed the discovery, de Soldanis expressed his unqualified conviction as to the truth behind the episode. While he had heard the arguments dismissing the discovery, de Soldanis declared himself convinced by Stadl's explanation and subsequently lists the discovery with others unearthed in Gozo as a relic from the island's Phoenician past.<sup>13</sup> As in other instances, de Soldanis' patriotic feelings seem to have prevailed over a more rational and cautious approach. Count Giovanni Antonio Ciantar (1696–1778), while admitting never to have read Stadl's account, was of the opinion that the idol represented Isis. As with de Soldanis, Ciantar seems to have been motivated by patriotic rather than objective considerations.<sup>14</sup>

Other authors were either more guarded in their description of the event or dismissed it entirely. The diarist Giuseppe Agius – de Soldanis'

11 Stadl's original account is to be found in NLM, Libr. MS 170, 225–64, together with other writings by the same author. The treatise was intended for public distribution and a number of copies of the original were made, such as that in NLM, Libr. MS 140, 170–87.

12 The account discusses the objections raised as follows: the veracity of dreams (pp. 225–30); the islands' history (230–62); the sovereign's right to the treasure (262–3), and Pace's passing over the treasure to Cassar (264).

13 Agius de Soldanis, 'Il Gozo antico-moderno', 58: '... che pure a mio avviso conosce da Fenici l'origine, e perche in questo tempo dimoravo in Malta spesso sentivo dire dal volgo, che mai persuadersi ha potuto come il Gozo, Isola tanto picciola abbi potuto non che formare, ma riportare un Vitello d'oro, ma presto comparve in mano degli eruditi dotta dissertazione manoscritta dal menzionato Siniscalco de Stadl, provando fondamente come poteva il Gozo aver il Vitello d'oro, ed ora il benigno lettore anco vedrà che non solo potea, ma in qualche maniera al Gozo conveniva averlo.' See also id., *Della Lingua Punica*, 26.

14 Ciantar, 365.

own brother – while not committing himself to the veracity of the discovery adds some details which are not usually given in the story. While Agius stated that Pace had indeed passed over the idol to Cassar through sheer ignorance, the latter periodically handed over money to the discoverer of the treasure. Ominously, this raises the possibility of Cassar having been blackmailed by Pace into giving him regular sums of cash and when the former refused to pay up any longer, the peasant came up with the story of the treasure and had Cassar reported to the courts. The accused had been a friend of de Vilhena and, among other, kept the grand master regularly informed about happenings in Gozo. Cassar's repeated negations of the knowledge of any treasure led to his brutal torturing. He was then taken to the hospital, suffering from the lethal effects of torture and where he was administered communion by way of the viaticum. As he was receiving communion, Cassar was heard stating that 'By this God here present and who is to judge me shortly, I swear it is not true that I have had this treasure, and all that has been imputed to me is false.' Cassar died a few days later after suffering an hour of torture by means of the *corda* and a further thirteen-and-a-half hours on the *cavalletto*. He was kept in chains even while close to death in hospital and these were only removed some sixteen hours after he passed away. Agius's manuscript diary was never intended for public consumption and contained some quite daring statements, some of which ended up being prudently rendered undecipherable at some later stage.<sup>15</sup> Onorato Bres (1758–1818) was a near contemporary of the event but at the same time a more detached one, since the Order had in the meantime departed. In his discussion of Maltese antiquities, Bres dismisses the golden calf as being of doubtful existence, even though it had been discussed by Ciantar, de Soldanis, and Stadl.<sup>16</sup>

Newly-discovered documentation directly bearing on the case or somewhat related to it allows further investigation beyond the sources discussed above. Pride of place in this respect goes to a lengthy denunciation of Antonio Pace to Inquisitor Serbelloni spanning the period between late July and September 1729, that is at the height of the case.<sup>17</sup> The case against Pace was that, upon discovering the treasure,

15 NLM, Libr. MS 1146/1, 647–9.

16 O. Bres, *Malta Antica Illustrata co' Monumenti e coll' Istoria* (Rome, 1816), 128.

17 A[rchive] of the I[nquisition] M[alta], Proc.[essi] vol. 110, Case 98, ff. 652–82.

the devil who was the custodian of the hidden idol, appeared to him, accompanied by various monsters, mostly in the form of serpents. The devil then instructed Pace that he could only rid himself of those terrible creatures if he signed a pact with his own blood with him. Upon hearing this, Pace cut open one of his fingers and used the flowing blood to sign away his soul to the devil. The case was first brought to the attention of Inquisitor Serbelloni by Giovanni Pietro Apap, canon of the Gozo collegiate church and the Holy Office's delegate in Gozo, on 21 July. The inquisitor proceeded by instructing Apap to investigate the case further. Various witnesses confirmed that Pace had told them he had found the treasure and also that, in the process of doing so, the devil accompanied by other evil creatures had appeared to him.

The sworn evidence submitted often further arouses suspicion as to the honesty or intellectual stability of the individual reputed to have discovered the treasure. Not only had he been led to the site of the treasure by a dream but, in the process of unearthing it, he had encountered the devil and other evil spirits. It is not unreasonable to speculate that Pace might have concocted the entire episode from the typical eighteenth-century sermons and visual imagery in which hell and the devil featured both often and prominently.

The first detailed evidence to be submitted was that of Don Deodato Formosa, the bishop's vicar in Gozo and, like Apap, a canon of the Gozo *Matrice*. He stated that, upon enquiring with Pace's wife as to the veracity of the story, she replied that her husband, who at the time was being held under arrest in Gozo, had confirmed its truth, while also saying that he had casually injured his finger while excavating the treasure. Some days later Formosa met Judge Cumbo in the main square of Rabat and the latter told him that Pace had confessed of having purposely cut his finger in order to perform some superstitious practice, which Cumbo suspected to be the signing of a pact with the devil. This was confirmed by Don Giovanni Battista Bonafuè Cumbo who added that Giacomo Farrugia had noticed Pace while digging for the treasure. Being afraid of being denounced to the authorities, Pace proceeded to sign away his soul to the devil using his own blood. Formosa and Don Giliberto Sciriha went together to the church of St John the Evangelist and its nearby cemetery, where Pace had sought refuge to escape from justice. Upon telling him that the grand master

had offered him impunity, the accused confirmed that he had found the treasure and that the devil had appeared to him as he was excavating in the form of a big hooded figure, together with various evil creatures mostly in the form of serpents. In order to be rid of them, Pace claimed, the devil instructed him to wound himself and spray his own blood over those unearthly beings, which he promptly did and the creatures left him. Pace, however, denied having signed any pact with the devil and asked that his case be referred to the inquisitor. When, the day before the submission of his evidence, Formosa went back to talk to Pace, he found out that the latter had by then been transferred to the grand master's palace in Malta to be interrogated there.<sup>18</sup>

The inquisition proceeded by gathering evidence from no less than fifteen witnesses, some of whom being interrogated more than once. These included the three investigating judges, namely the notorious Giulio Cumbo, Giovanni Battista Guicciardi, and Raffaele Balsano, Pace's own wife, his thirteen-year-old daughter, and other relatives as well as Pace himself. In his evidence Don Giovanni Battista Bonafuè Cumbo stated that Pace, alias *Pnar* had, following the alleged discovery of the treasure, sought sanctuary in a church to prevent his arrest by the lay authorities. He also confirmed that Pace recounted the story about the serpents but added that Pace claimed the devil told him to leave the treasure where it was for three months and then to take it and do what he wanted with it.<sup>19</sup> Sciriha stated that, about two months before Pace had approached him, requesting to rent a tower in the countryside from him. It was then that Sciriha got to know that Pace was the one being suspected of discovering the treasure. Afterwards Pace had sought refuge in the cemetery adjacent to the Augustinian convent. Since the lay authorities had suspected a certain Michele with the discovery of the treasure and, given that the latter was about to be tortured with the *cavalletto* following his torture by means of the *corda*, Sciriha went over to Pace requesting him to tell the truth to avoid further suffering to Michele. Eventually Pace admitted to him that he had indeed found the treasure but he also told him to go over to Giuseppe Cassar, who by then was already detained by the lay authorities in Gozo, and request him to hand over the idol back to him, so that he could declare that

18 Ibid., f. 655, dated 27.7.1729. Document reproduced in the Appendix, below.

19 Ibid., f. 656, dated 5.8.1729.



he had found the treasure. Sciriha duly proceeded to talk to Cassar on the matter, but the latter denied everything while describing Pace as a fraudster. When subsequently Sciriha again met Pace, together with Formosa, Pace recounted the story as stated by Formosa. However, when the latter left and as Sciriha was locking up the church of St John, Pace whispered in his ear that all that he had said was not true.<sup>20</sup>

Gaetano Calleja testified that Pace had asked him to accompany him to a visit to Andrea Falzon, parish priest of Nadur, from whom Pace wanted to purchase some residences, which he actually did for 60 *scudi*. On their way back Calleja asked Pace how come he had to borrow the 60 *scudi* required for the transaction since, as was being rumoured in Gozo, he had become rich through the discovery of the treasure. Pace retorted that he had done so only to give the impression that he hadn't discovered any treasure and that he would pay off the debt he had incurred within a short time.<sup>21</sup> In the context that Cassar regularly loaned out such sums of money to various individuals, Pace's declaration of having incurred such a debt assumes considerable significance even if the latter's name does not appear among those who owed Cassar money when the latter's property was confiscated. On 19 August 1714 Parish Priest Falzon had incurred a debt of 25 *scudi* with Cassar that was being paid back at the rate of two *scudi* annually.<sup>22</sup> In his evidence Judge Cumbo revealed that it was actually Calleja who had written to the grand master to inform him that Antonio Pace was the one who had discovered the treasure.<sup>23</sup>

Given the evidence that Pace had committed some sort of pact with the devil, on 2 September 1729 Inquisitor Serbelloni ordered the arrest of Pace who had meanwhile been released by the state authorities. During his interrogation, Pace stated that he lived in the street of St Lucia in Rabat, was about 35 years old, and that he earned his living as a stone-carrier, working the land and gathering what he could from the countryside. He also affirmed his Christian belief and that he had seen a shadow in the form of a large spectral figure. Other than that, Pace refused to answer the questions posed by the inquisitorial investigators and was conducted back to his cell.<sup>24</sup> The Dominican Fra Vincenzo

20 Ibid., f. 658v, dated 9.8.1729.

21 Ibid., ff. 660–1, dated 23.8.1729.

22 N[otarial] A[rchive] V[alletta], R. 394/12, Notary Bartolomeo Paschale, f. 115v.

23 AIM Proc. 110, Case 98, ff. 661–3, dated 26.8.1729.

24 Ibid., f. 671, dated 7.9.1729.

Farrugia was then asked to interrogate Pace in his cell but even this yielded no results and Pace remained adamantly silent.<sup>25</sup> When he was again interrogated and only provided laconic statements, Pace was subjected to torture by means of the *corda*, again with no result.<sup>26</sup> A final attempt at eliciting some response from Pace a few days later also proved fruitless.<sup>27</sup> On 11 November 1729 the Congregation of the Holy Office in Rome instructed Serbelloni to release Pace from prison and this was carried out on 12 December, once such instructions were received in Malta.<sup>28</sup> Pace's stubborn refusal to admit anything, even under torture, had secured his release by the inquisition.

Besides the inquisitorial investigation, other documentation casts further shadows on the veracity of the official account of the episode, pointing out other possible venues of truth. On 28 October 1729, just over two months following Cassar's condemnation and death, Notary Bartolomeo Paschale was summoned to the grand master's palace to draw up a deed stipulating the donation of Cassar's confiscated property to the hospital of St John.<sup>29</sup> That institution had been founded in 1719 on the initiative of the Gozitan brothers Fra Gregorio and Giovanni Maria Camilleri, a former archpriest of Gharb and subsequently canon of the Gozo *Matrice*.<sup>30</sup> Lack of sufficient funds had, however, beset the project from the very start. The precise motivation which led Vilhena to donate the newly-acquired wealth to the hospital is not clear, but the action of donating the wealth of a Gozitan to a charitable institution on that same island would certainly have gone a long way towards calming any ill-feelings on the part of the islanders, stirred following the treatment meted to Cassar.

The contract provides a description of Cassar's immovable and moveable property in terms of the sentence meted out on him on 16 August 1729 and which came into effect on 22 September. The immovable wealth consisted of a group of residences situated in Rabat, Gozo, near the parish church of St George. Another group of houses with a field attached to them were situated in the village of St Lawrence, then

25 Ibid., ff. 671v–72, dated 13.9.1729.

26 Ibid., ff. 675–7, dated 24.9.1729.

27 Ibid., f. 679, dated 28.9.1729.

28 Ibid.

29 NAV, R. 394/12, Notary Bartolomeo Paschale, ff. 114–19.

30 C. Galea, 'Medical Care on Hospitaller Gozo', *Melita Historica*, 16 (2013), 64–5. On 30 August 1723 Giovanni Maria Camilleri was found murdered together with his slave in his residence in the Gozo castello. The culprit was never apprehended.



Baron de Stadl, from Bonaventura Attardi's *Bilancia della Verità* (Palermo, 1738)

part of the parish of Gharb. Cassar had also had owned various moneys which he had loaned out or otherwise invested and which totalled the considerable sum of over 2,500 *scudi*. Through the contract the grand master had all the property was transferred to the hospital under a number of conditions. For example, when any of the invested funds expired, the hospital administrators were not to spend the capital, but had to re-invest it. Another clause stipulated that, in case of the eventual recovery of the treasure, all the donated property would revert back to the grand master, while the hospital would get the treasure in whatever state it was found. Vilhena also required the hospital administrators to celebrate masses in the hospital's chapel on days of obligation and also on the feast days of St Anthony of Padua, the patron saint of the grand master, of Saints Cosmas and Damian, and of St Theresa, and those of the Virgin Mary.

Besides describing in detail the wealth owned by Cassar that was confiscated following his condemnation, the contract indirectly sheds further light on the whole episode. Much of the accused's wealth consisted of cash that had been loaned out and this indicates Cassar's business activity as a money-lender. While Pace's name does not feature anywhere in the document, the possibility that the latter had requested cash in the form of a loan from Cassar and which, for some reason, was not given cannot be excluded. The nature of the relation between Cassar and Pace is never clarified in the documentation, other than one being the recipient and the other the original discoverer of the treasure. A main witness interrogated by the inquisition had stated that Cassar considered Pace to be a dishonest person and that Pace had whispered to him in his ear that the whole story was a fabrication. The evidence does indeed indicate that Pace was, at best, unreliable and one with a fertile sense of imagination. Whether he went as far as inventing the entire episode to get back at Cassar cannot at this stage be proven, but the indications in that direction are rather strong.

Vilhena's condition that, if the treasure was ever recovered, it would be swapped with the property confiscated may indicate that the grand master honestly believed that a treasure had actually been discovered. In no way, however, does it assert that the treasure had been disposed of by Cassar. Moreover it might well have been inserted simply to make the story more credible.

With Vilhena a major protagonist in the whole episode, his character and method of government should also be taken into consideration. The

grand master is known to have been reported to the Congregation of the Holy Office in Rome at least twice, being accused of flagrant abuses of the Order's statutes as well as the mistreatment of the Maltese. When Knight Remsching and the Maltese conventual chaplain Francesco Farrugia accused Vilhena of various abuses, they were imprisoned on their return to Malta. In November 1733 Antonio Cecci [Ceci?] and some other anonymous Maltese submitted a lengthy denunciation of Vilhena accusing him and his ministers of, among other, tyranny, avarice, simony, and direct interference in the course of justice including the frame-ups of innocent individuals.<sup>31</sup> The document, which seems to have remained unknown to Vilhena, was submitted by the Holy Office to an unnamed former inquisitor, who had served in Malta some time before during Vilhena's magistracy, for his comments. The inquisitor commented in detail on every accusation, confirming them and often providing further details.

When taken over to Malta, Pace was interrogated in the grand master's palace, possibly by the grand master himself or at least most likely in his presence. This was certainly an unusual method of procedure and such interrogations always took place at the courts of justice by the appointed judge, in this case the notorious Giulio Cumbo. In the context of Pace's and the grand master's own characters, the fact that the former was questioned in the magistral palace and that at some point he had been promised immunity from prosecution if he collaborated raises the possibility of both having their own interest in implicating Cassar with a crime that may well have never taken place.

## Conclusion

While the *vitello d'oro* saga cannot be at this point be conclusively considered as either a figment of the imagination or – more ominously – as a planned stratagem to implicate and condemn

31 This document is reproduced in full in W. Zammit, 'The Dissemination of Unorthodoxy and New Ideas in Malta, 1700–1798', Ph.D. thesis, University of Malta, 2001, II, Appendix B, Document X. One such accusation ran as follows: 'Quante violenze, quante oppressioni promiscuamente li vassalli, et i cavalieri hanno sofferte dall'ira feroce del Gran Maestro, che una volta sdegnato mai perdona, e per sfogare il suo indomabile impeto si fanno nascere processi di sognati delitti.'

an innocent individual, the existence of the treasure itself and Cassar's 'guilt' are questionable more than ever. The sole promoter of the story, Antonio Pace, can hardly be ascribed any credibility while the victim was certainly a prosperous individual, the fall of whom benefited the grand master and possibly provided Pace with revenge, if not with pecuniary advantage. Cassar remained adamant in his negations not only throughout many hours of atrocious torture which was to lead to his death, but even as he was dying and receiving the last sacraments and at a point when he was not being interrogated. Rather than a treasure-trove, the entire episode was most likely one of machinations, revenge, rapacity, and a flagrant abuse of justice.

## Appendix

Sworn evidence given by Deodato Formosa regarding Antonio Pace on 27 July 1729

[f. 655] Sedici giorni sono in circa dopo l'Ave Maria de' Morti, discorrendo io con la moglie d'Antonio Pace, la quale all'ora era nella carcere laica, ed è al presente, e persuadendola a dir la verità per liberarsi da questi travagli, mi ha confidato, che il suo marito gli abbia detto di aver trovato un tesoro, cioè un vitellino d'oro, e per scavare la terra per prendere detto vitellino si ferì da se stesso nel deto della mano, e sparse il sangue, et io non l'interrogai a che fine il detto di lei marito abbia fatto questo, supponendomi fosse ciò occorso casualmente.

Dieci giorno poi sono in circa discorrendo io con il signor dottore Giulio Cumbo, giudice delegato nella causa dell'accennato tesoro, questo mi disse, che dall'atti del processo costava che il sudetto spargimento di sangue fosse fatto superstizionalmente per qualche patto col demonio, e mi soggiunse il medesimo signor giudice, che molto si dubita, che il detto Antonio abbia scritto l'anima sua al demonio; e questo discorso seguì verso le cinque dopo mezzo giorno nella piazza del Tocco, o pure verso l'Ave Maria de Morti in casa del detto signor giudice, et a questo discorso, mi pare che era presente il sacerdote Don Giovanni Battista Bonafuè Cumbo, il quale nel medesimo giorno verso la sera passeggiando ambi due intorno al Borgo di quest'isola mi disse d'aver egli udito, che il detto Antonio Pace, avendo visto che fosse scoperto nel scavar la terra da un uomo, di nome Giacomo Farrugia, ed avendo temuto d'esser denunciato alla Corte, il demonio, che custodiva il detto tesoro in figura di un uomo con lo scorrucio gli diede una carta, da che si dubita, che il detto Antonio abbia scritto in quella carta col proprio sangue l'anima sua al demonio.

Di più lunedì primo scorso verso le quattro ore dopo mezzo giorno, essendomi portato dal detto Antonio Pace nella Chiesa di San Giovanni Evangelista contigua col cimiterio in campagna dal sacerdote Don Giliberto Sciriha a fine di persuaderlo di confidarci la verità, e liberar se stesso, ed i suoi complici dal rigore della giustizia, con rimettersi alla clemenza del Principe, giachè l'istesso Principe gl'offerisce l'impunità, allora il riferito Antonio ci ha confidato, che veramente avea trovato il mentionato tesoro, e che nello scoprirlo gli era comparso un uomo [v] con lo scorrucio, ed era il demonio

custode di detto tesoro, e che in quell mentre avea visto diversi mostri, per liberarsi dalli quali gli avea suggerito il detto demonio ferirsi nel deto della mano, e di spruzzare il sangue della ferita verso quei mostri, et avendo ciò fatto, i detti mostri disparvero, protestandosi però il detto Antonio di non aver fatto niuna poliza, con cui avesse rinegato Dio, o' la Beata Vergine, o' i Santi, ed allora si remise alla Misericordia di Dio, e della Chiesa, imponendomi per saldo di sua coscienza di chiamare il ministro del Sant'Officio. E ieri mattina avendo io dato parte a ciò al detto ministro, questo mi rispose di trasferirsi dal detto Antonio dopo Vespro del medesimo giorno, il che non si posse eseguire, stante che prima del detto Vespero il detto Antonio fù portato in Malta [?] dal luogotenente del Gran Visconte per presentarsi al Principe, e dicesi, che al presente si ritrova sequestrate nel Palazzo dell'istesso Principe. Ed io ho fatto la presente denuncia per scarico di mia coscienza senza passione veruna.

[Signed] Deodatus Formosa

Source: AIM Processi 110, Case 98.